

## ***Donors, Analysts and Agencies: Aid Coordination Structures and Their Impact on Domestic Policy Capacity***

Paper prepared for presentation at the 21st NISPAcee Annual Conference  
"Regionalisation and Inter-regional Cooperation," May 16-18, 2013, Belgrade, Serbia

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### Abstract:

Coordination, or the lack of it, is at the core of the ferocious contemporary debates about official development assistance (ODA). Burdened both with an extraordinary multiplicity of actors (state and non-state, multilateral and bilateral) and often weak administrative capacity in recipient countries, ODA is increasingly blamed for perpetuating rather than resolving dependency. Thus, along a line of criticism that if anything has grown far more emphatic over the past quarter-century, Elliott Morss (1984) argued that "the proliferation of donors and projects ... is having a negative impact on the major government institutions of developing nations. Instead of working to establish comprehensive and consistent national development objectives and policies, government officials are forced to focus on pleasing donors by approving projects that mirror the current development 'enthusiasm' of each donor. Further, efforts to implement the large number of discrete, donor-financed projects, each with its own specific objectives and reporting requirements, use up far more time and effort than is appropriate."

It is criticism such as this which pushed the development community into a gradual rethink culminating in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, aiming at shifting decision-making from donors to recipients by promoting the principle of country ownership.

The paper contributes to this debate by investigating the relationships between donors, national political and administrative structures and concrete aid recipients – often host country executive agencies. Far from being passive colonized victims, all too often line agencies targeted in aid programs prove skillful in capturing their "own" donor assistance programs that can be used in promoting agency-level goals often at odds not only with overall donor intent, but also with other parts of the domestic executive. As a consequence, if host countries are to take ownership of development programs, they need not only to generate support at the grassroots level, but also to integrate the content and targets of donor-funded programs within a national policy consensus – a goal requiring considerable policy and coordination capacity.

At the core of the present paper is the role of the "National Coordination Units" designed as official host country counterparts for the European Union aid effort. The paper uses the case of Georgia to explore their composition, location within the national policy-making context and analyzes their sometimes precarious relationship both with the European Union and domestic line agencies, and asks whether and how this impacts aid effectiveness and the resolution of potential conflicts.

## **1. Introduction. The Development Community: From Fragmentation to Aid Coordination and Country Ownership?**

Coordination, or the lack of it, is at the core of the ferocious contemporary debates about official development assistance (ODA). Burdened both with an extraordinary multiplicity of actors (state and non-state, multilateral and bilateral) and often weak administrative capacity in recipient countries, ODA is increasingly blamed for perpetuating rather than resolving dependency. Thus, along a line of criticism that if anything has grown far more emphatic over the past quarter-century, Elliott Morss (1984) argued that

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It is criticism such as this which pushed the development community into a gradual rethink culminating in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, aiming at shifting decision-making from donors to recipients and from individual projects to program- and sector based approaches or general budget support. The reasoning behind this has been “the most basic principle of aid effectiveness: that sustainable results are best achieved when host countries own and lead the development process” (Peasley 2010).

While country ownership sounds appealing, both development practice and even the academic research devoted to its study have so far done little to tie in the concept with actual management practice. Writing in the 1990s, Buse (1997, p. 449) criticized

academic and policy research in general as well as in the health sector in particular for its focus on donors rather than host countries. “Although there has been considerable experience with coordination strategies, .. (t)he literature is striking in its bias towards the needs and perspectives of the donor community. There has been little analysis of the manner in which recipient ministries .. manage donors and the influx of resources.”

This is further complicated by an academic community which is strikingly heterogeneous both with regard to scholarly background and political orientation. Thus, while scholars on the left side of the political spectrum question the concept of country ownership given their distrust of the power relations inherent in national executives (Buitter 2007; Faust 2010 ), paradoxically very similar positions are advocated by official donors such as USAID who hesitate to include host country governments out of a basic sense of distrust (as communicated to me in a recent skype chat with a long-time USAID consultant: “We're USAID. We support the private sector, and never admit the government exists. Economic Growth offices work with the private sector, and Democracy and Governance work with NGOs. Drown the government in a bathtub!”)

The present paper tries to tackle such deficits by examining perhaps one of the most ambitious endeavors to build up host country coordination capacity, the European Union’s attempt to set up a specialized coordination mechanism – called NCUs, or national coordination units – in the countries of the former Soviet Union. At this point this is still an exploratory case study, based on direct personal experience working with both European and American development projects in Georgia between 2004 and 2006. Over the coming year, the preliminary findings sketched out here will be updated and explored more systematically through research both in ENP countries and in Brussels.

## **2. Coordination Mechanisms in European Technical Assistance and in Post-Soviet Politics**

European ODA has long known dedicated host-country coordination mechanisms. In the Union's relationship with ACP countries, so-called "National Authorising Officers" (NAOs) have been a distinctive feature going back to the Lomé Conventions (1975) and reconfirmed in the Cotonou Agreement which succeeded it (for a detailed discussion, see Frederiksen *et al.* 2007).

Whether and to what extent this model has influenced the subsequent setup of National Coordination Units in the countries of the former Soviet Union is unclear. Certainly both mechanisms display a similar orientation towards a basic partnership with host country executives, with – for instance – civil society representatives coming in only as secondary players. However, given that relations with the ACP countries and those with the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were until the recent establishment of the External Action Service not even handled by the same General Directorate, direct institutional imitation must remain at least questionable. This is confirmed by Bailey and de Propriis' (2004) account of the history of the PHARE program in the Central European accession countries; according to their description, EU programs in the new member states were initially constructed from scratch on a project to project basis, with overarching coordination introduced only very gradually as a response to practical problems. If there was any kind of institutional transfer it was quite possibly related more to the coordination mechanisms built up over time within the original member states (Kassim *et al.* 2000), rather than in the EU's relationship with the ACP region. This relationship is all the more compelling since in contrast to the ACP region, both the accession countries and – albeit to a lesser extent – what are now the countries of the European Neighborhood faced not merely the lesser task of technical assistance coordination per se, but on a policy level also that of harmonization with the *acquis communautaire*.

National Coordination Units were set up in domestic policy settings characterized by higher than average coordination needs. Soviet-style executives had been distinguished by excessively vertical hierarchy on the one hand, rampant fragmentation on the other hand (Van Atta 1989; Huskey 1990; Wollmann 1997; Shevchenko 2004). Overlapping

lines of authority can on the one hand be explained as a strategy of political control within authoritarian and totalitarian systems (the parallels between Soviet-style administrative overlap and what Hans Mommsen famously termed the “polycratic” character of the national socialist regime are striking). On a more prosaic level, duplication of structures largely (but not exclusively) resulted from the parallel existence of Party and ministerial hierarchies, with the former predominantly in charge of policy formulation. This meant that with the collapse of the Party hierarchy, policy formulation and decision-making capacity was significantly impaired,<sup>1</sup> giving free rein to interagency turf fights.

When the first NCUs were set up in the early 1990s, post-Soviet governments for all the reasons described above were hardly in a position to exert much influence of their own to shape the process. This led to a paradoxical situation in which European actors found themselves actively setting up and promoting what were supposed to be purely host-country institutions run along principles of host country ownership. The – at least initially – quite dominant role of the EU was therefore never quite reflected on the normative level. On the one hand, NCU activities frequently were strongly influenced by EU actors. In the case of Uzbekistan, the unit even started out as “a joint Uzbek - EU organization” all through August 2000, only then to become “an institution of the Government of Uzbekistan only, supported by an advisory team of European and Local experts” (TACIS representation Uzbekistan). While this was certainly an extreme case, practical capacity-building support was intense, most recently in the latter half of the 2000s with a series of “technical assistance to the NCU” projects implemented across the post-Soviet space. In spite of this crucial place in EU-host country cooperation, the role and even the very institution of National Coordination Units has never been formalized in the many otherwise very detailed bilateral agreements. For example, under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement for Kazakhstan the relationship is officially governed at ministerial level by the “Co-operation Council” with annual meetings, assisted - , “normally at senior civil servant level” – by the more frequent meetings of the Co-and on

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<sup>1</sup> Dimitrov et al (2006) have explored the loss and subsequent restoration of administrative capacity in several Central and Eastern European countries in interesting detail.

Trade, Investment, Energy and Transport (Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan). In addition there is a Parliamentary Co-operation Committee bringing together European and Kazakh parliamentarians. (These committees are also the official line of response in case of conflicts about treaty conditionality, or “breach of PCA” situations).

Position of NCUs vis-à-vis domestic executives: While no comprehensive information across all affected countries was available for the purposes of this paper, what is striking is that none of the cases sampled sited the NCU within the Ministry of Finance. This is in stark contrast to ACP countries, almost half of which in 2003 had opted for just that arrangement (Frederiksen et al. 2007, p. 2). Arrangements varied from stand-alone agencies such as in Uzbekistan (the Georgian case, with the NCU ostensibly located at a more elevated position within the interministerial hierarchy, can be considered as a subset of this solution) to the Kazakh pattern, where the NCU is integrated into the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade (Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan 2011).

### **3. Coordination in Action: Georgia and the Reform of the national Quality Infrastructure**

The following main section explores an empirical case from Georgia which I experienced personally working as a development consultant for the EU and subsequently USAID between 2004 and 2006. Section 3.1 begins by outlining the setup of the Georgian NCU and its interrelations with other bodies. Section 3.2 moves to the sectoral level and investigates the successes and failure of coordination both within the traditional interministerial system and within the new coordination structures set up in the course of transition.

#### **3.1 The Georgian National Coordination Agency within the domestic executive**

As mentioned above, Georgia's NCU is not affiliated with any of the major line ministries. Since the beginning of the Rose Revolution, the coordination of European integration (a portfolio later expanded to encompass "Euro-Atlantic integration" and hence to also cover NATO liaison tasks) has been entrusted to a "state minister" without direct portfolio. Part of the presidential chancellery, the number of state ministers has since 2004 varied between four and five at one time, entrusted with cross-cutting tasks such as the State Minister for Conflict Resolution (in early 2008 poignantly renamed to "State Minister for Reintegration.") While some state ministers have officially been given the status of deputy prime ministers and thus, ostensibly, hierarchical pre-eminence, their influence in practice has depended largely on their personal stature and the character of their relationship with President Saakashvili. The vagaries of the position have been obvious even in the case of undoubtedly the most powerful of them, former Russian oligarch Kakha Bendukidze. Appointed Georgian Minister of Economic Development immediately following the Rose Revolution, his subsequent transfer to the position of State Minister in charge of Reform Coordination initially gave rise to massive speculation as to whether this constituted a demotion. In the event, this interpretation proved unsubstantiated: however, the same is probably not true of the Georgian government's long-time State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, Giorgi Baramidze (2005 until mid-2012), who was kicked upstairs to this new position after losing the Defense Ministry to an ultimate political insider.

Among the concrete tasks of the EU coordination side of the state ministry are both "EU Programmes Coordinating", including both preparation and monitoring of ongoing projects and the weighty "European Integration coordination," covering legislative approximation and implementation and negotiation within the European Neighborhood Framework (*The Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration*). With regard to its approximation tasks in particular, the state ministry is in principle in charge all concerned line ministries; however, given that the NCU's detailed list of subordinate ministries enumerates only ministers' names without giving any details of staff or units specifically tasked as liaison on harmonization, one wonders just how much influence the agency wields in practice (*The Office of the State Minister on*

*European and Euro-Atlantic Integration*). Its overall role can only be further diminished by the fact that besides itself, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also been prominently assigned EU coordination tasks.<sup>2</sup>

### **3.2 Aid and policy coordination in the Georgian quality infrastructure sector**

In the following section, both coordination problems as well as old- and new-style coordination mechanisms are discussed using one detailed sectoral case derived from the author's experience managing an EU technical assistance project located at the Georgian Standards Agency Sakstandarty, and a subsequent period as USAID short-term consultant on the same topic.

#### **3.2.1 Sectoral context**

National “quality infrastructures” (or to use less of an insider term, technical standards and quality control) are an area that has undergone massive regulatory change between communist and post-communist times. On the level of process, national regulatory systems have moved from an environment of state-set mandatory requirements to an interplay of state regulation with voluntary private sector-led standards as it is exemplified in the European “New Approach”, and in the longer run they are also being urged to move from old style product to modern and more flexible process standards such as for instance the HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control points) protocols used in food safety regulation.<sup>3</sup> On the level of institutions, this has meant breaking up the old overarching organizations uniting standard-setting, accreditation, certification and market surveillance under one roof, often – such as in the Georgian case - also with the addition of metrology departments. On the level of international commitments, institutional

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<sup>2</sup> This duplication is not without parallels in post-communist countries, see for example Agnes Batory's (2012) detailed description of the evolution of EU coordination in Hungary.

<sup>3</sup> For just one example of the expanding social science literature on the topic see (Casella 2001).

separation in this area is mandated by the WTO's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and in the case of Georgia (a WTO member since 1999) was also made a conditionality for a World Bank Structural Adjustment Credit in 2002 (Georgia Third Structural Adjustment Credit Supervision Mission 2002). Far from embodying neoliberal *diktat*, this demand was in fact crucial to the integrity of quality control institutions. This became obvious *ex negativo* from the reports given to us by Georgian consumer advocates according to whom fly-by-night testing laboratories, given accreditation by corrupt and/or powerless accreditation officials, were wont to regularly certify positive test results without actual investigation, taking dictation of the desired results by telephone from their clients (personal communication, Tbilisi 2004). Under the pressure of World Bank conditionality, a pro forma separation had indeed been effected in 2003, however in practice this had meant little more than the mounting of new doors signs for selected units, while interpersonal and – even more importantly as will be addressed below – financial relations continued as before.

### **3.2.2 Donor fragmentation**

A full listing of the multiple international efforts in some way associated with the wider quality infrastructure would take up much space while contributing little of interest. The dysfunctional effects inherent in donor fragmentation are best illustrated by taking one specific example, that of testing laboratories and the wine industry (all details based on personal communications, Tbilisi 2004 and 2005). Given both need (allegedly Georgian wine exports at the time constituted a multiple of what could have been processed from actual grape harvests) and rare profitability (in a country whose top export for several years running was scrap metal), wine testing was an obvious and useful area for Georgian quality control laboratories. Thus, a GTZ project charged with providing technical assistance to Georgian wine production under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture spent considerable time and resources assisting the ministry in building a new dedicated wine testing laboratory. Almost finished, the new laboratory suddenly found itself at the center of a political row caused by the fact that a separate testing laboratory set up by the private-sector Union of Georgian Exporters with funding from UNDP had also relied on

wine testing as a major source of revenue. In the event, the “Exporters” lab never properly got off the ground, and several of its newly trained staff were subsequently taken on by the GTZ lab. In the meantime, a U.S. State Department police adviser seconded to the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs had – unbeknownst to other actors – been working out recommendations for the development of the Ministry’s criminology lab which – again – significantly focused on fraud related to wine production, and there were even rumors of a potential IFC loan to yet another, fourth laboratory to be dedicated to the same purpose.

While going far beyond the boundary of the absurd, this example illustrates a basic problem of foreign aid: lack of communication and the capture of donors by their counterparts. Absent comprehensive donor databases (attempted in vain more than once) or, better, intensive interpersonal networking among donor representatives, in the post-Soviet context and beyond this donor projects oftentimes were important as a source of revenue rather than knowledge gain for the agencies concerned. This became visible even in physical infrastructure: thus, in the Georgian agriculture ministry the true organizational dividing lines became visible in the generator cables criss-crossing the building for the event of the next power outage, several of them funded from, and centered around, some specific international aid effort. (An exception to this was the generator servicing the ministerial cabinet itself, according to local lore once part of the equipment of a Soviet-era submarine).

### **3.2.2 Interagency conflict and Soviet-style interministerial coordination**

A core element in Soviet-era interministerial coordination were formal *soglasovanie* (agreement) and *visirovanie* practices. On the surface referring to formal consultation and reconciliation procedures within the Soviet executive, the term also became eponymous for the decision-making style in the late Soviet period: thus, *perestroika* era economists described Soviet economic reality as an *ekonomika soglasovaniia* or “bargaining economy” rather than the supposed rigid hierarchies of the centrally planned economy. However, such bargaining did not imply a consensus-based style of decision-making.

*Soglasovanie* procedures have remained in place in post-Soviet administrative culture; however, bereft of the Party apparatus capable of supporting various actors and swinging decisions one way or another they seem to have lost much of their meaning.

In the case example described in this paper, this became obvious at the very start of the project. As we were given to understand more or less bluntly from the very beginning, our counterpart's interest in the project lay not in its ostensible purpose of technical assistance, allegedly obsolete due to delays in the tendering procedure. Rather (aside from the hope for improved sanitary installations to result from EU-funded renovation works) from the counterpart's point of view the main promise of the project lay in its contribution to the development of the "institutional infrastructure", to wit: the "Code of Technical Regulating" [sic] on which they requested an (obviously desirably positive) EU expertise. As became clear from the ministerial "remarks" resulting from the *soglasovanie* process, this ambitious piece of proposed legislation had already provoked vociferous opposition by both other executive agencies and private sector actors. According to the interpretation of our legal experts this was because the essence of the Code lay in reestablishing the former predominance of Sakstandarty which had been impaired both by WTO/TBT conditions and by the increasing role of other ministries (Agriculture and Health in particular) in the specific area of food safety.

This episode is remarkable from several points of view. First, going back to the issue of donor coordination, this was a clear case of an agency seeking EU support on what was, effectively, a piece of interagency warfare against other Georgian agencies, at least one of them supported by quite significant amounts of European budgetary support. Secondly, the accustomed system of interministerial *soglasovanie* had produced clear evidence of this; however this information was not channeled into the aid coordination process and only came to our attention because we had specifically asked for it given prior contextual knowledge about (post)Soviet administrative procedure. In particular, NCU and *soglasovanie* procedures remained entirely separate, precluding useful feedback that could have affected the coordination of aid efforts. Finally, although Soviet era *soglasovanie* has been described as a bargaining mechanism, in the post-Soviet

Georgian context it was obvious that its impact had been reduced dramatically. Asked about the widespread demands for a round-table style consultation on the proposed “Code,” the Sakstandarty chairman’s response was to declare any such consultation useless as “we know anyway what they are going to say.” As it emerged, the agency’s leadership hoped to push through a widely, and openly opposed piece of legislation primarily by using personal channels of influence. (Georgian observers acquainted with wider administrative politics declared this unrealistic; when asked about the – allegedly similarly flawed – “Sanitary Code” which had been forced through by the Health Ministry against massive resistance, they pointed out that unlike the Health Ministry, the Georgian Standards Agency would not be in a position to pay for MP’s stays in Swiss hospitals).

### **3.2.3 National Coordination Units and Conflicts around Conditionality**

Sakstandarti’s battle for a restoration of Soviet-type structures came to a head in late 2004 when the agency succeeded in persuading the Georgian government to sign a decree re-joining its formally separate sub-units in charge of accreditation, certification and market surveillance (or under its Soviet title, inspections). As it later turned out, the existing truce of formal separation and informal collaboration between the old sub-units had become untenable after the Georgian Chamber of Control had begun questioning the extent of cross-subsidization between formally independent entities characterized by vastly different degrees of profitability (personal communication, Sakstandarti employee, November 2004).

The fact that Sakstandarti was able to convince the Georgian government to support its cause was due to two main reasons: capacity constraints combined with a considerable degree of *chutzpah*. More concretely, an overstretched reformist government quite simply did not have the necessary technical knowledge (or resources to seek out independent expertise) to contradict an agency which claimed its proposed measures were part and parcel of “European harmonization”.

The missing factor in the agency's equation, however, was the fact that its previous attempts to have the proposed "Code of Technical Regulation" rubberstamped by donors had led to a considerable exchange of information between donors as well as Georgian stakeholders, producing widespread alarm in both communities. While the initial, crucial flow of information had been entirely independent of formal coordination entities such as the NCU, it was in this situation of growing confrontation that the state-centered European approach truly came into its own. Although without its own early alert systems, once aware of a potential problem the young Georgian officials staffing the agency immediately requested legal briefing from the EU-funded Georgian-European Policy and Legal Advice Centre on the issue, ultimately coordinating with the EU Delegation in Tbilisi when the latter submitted an official query questioning the decree's compatibility with international Georgian government obligations.

In the event, the forces of resistance prevailed, and the controversial decree was overturned, eventually leading to a deeper overhaul of the sector. This was due to a number of factors, first of all the external early warning system described above, but secondly a broader coalition of private sector and NGO stakeholders which had come together to demand standards reform. Just as initial alert, this public mobilization had been entirely independent of the NCU which at this time did not possess any public consultation mechanisms – a deficit which was overcome one year later with the creation of a Public Advisory Council staffed with prominent members of Georgian think-tanks and NGOs.

#### **4. In place of a conclusion**

Attempts to generalize from this exploratory case study are difficult in the absence so far of systematic comparative material on other countries, regions or donors. Some preliminary conclusions include the following

- Donor and project coordination crucially depends on its tie-in with the host country administration. Both in terms of information flow and political influence, the Georgian NCU was handicapped by its location at the margin of the

- presidential administration and outside of core ministries. While the official status of the EU-Georgian relationship under bilateral treaties did give it a certain leverage, this factor only came into play in a very conditional fashion.
- In the Georgian case, the Ministry of Euro-Atlantic Integration exclusively deals with EU and NATO liaison tasks. Given the fragmentation of donors which is the rule rather than the exception in the world of ODA, this makes possible coordination gains of questionable value. In the particular policy case described in this paper, success was possible because of parallel efforts at donor and stakeholder coordination unconnected with the NCU. For further research, it would be interesting to compare the Georgian case with other post-communist settings in which NCUs either have been reformatted to work with a wider variety of donors or are situated within a larger ministerial context.

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